**IS THE GLASS HALF FULL?**

Optimism is glamourized through modern day self-help books as the “be-all and end-all” of happiness, professed by society as the key to success in careers, relationships and academia. A disposition to expect the best, perceive all situations positively, and react to difficulties with faith in personal ability; optimism is renowned to be remarkable. But, asks Hiromi Hill, can it truly be an effective mindset for improving the wellbeing of secondary students; our future generation?

**What is Optimism?**

Optimists have a tendency to be hopeful, and perceive good fortune as permanent, and negative events as temporary and outside the brevity of personal control. Anthropologist Lionel Tiger describes optimism as an "attitude associated with an expectation about the social or material future; one which the evaluator regards as socially desirable, to his advantage, or for his pleasure". In saying this, there can be no single definition of optimism, at least characterized by its content, because what is considered optimism depends on what an individual regards as desirable. It is also crucial to remember that optimists are not predisposed to an abundance of good fortune throughout their lives; rather, their belief that things will eventually turn out favourably, and that something positive can be derived from any situation allows them to maintain positivity and hope, and experience the silver lining in every cloud.

When anticipating the future, it can be easy to imagine dire consequences, heartbreak or failure; thus, in order to generate and sustain goals, and to succeed against all apparent odds of human nature, hope and confidence in one’s abilities are needed. Being optimistic, and envisioning positive futures, allows for continued efforts and a heightened sense of motivation, and is central to all human endeavours, whether academic, athletic, occupational or political successes. Optimism assists in counteracting the fear and often unrealistic anticipations of failure and negative “what ifs?” which would otherwise prevent us from ever taking a chance, or starting towards a path of potential success. Psychologists Michael Scheider and Charles Carver believe that should a person consider, even in the face of difficulties that impediments can be overcome and goals can be achieved, then that person is optimistic.

**Little Optimism**: positive hopes for specific outcomes—e.g. “the bus will be on time today.” The product of an idiosyncratic learning history, it leads to desirable outcomes because it predisposes specific actions that are adaptive in behaviour.

**Big Optimism**: a broader sense that everything is going well—e.g. “Our nation is on the verge of greatness.” A biological tendency influenced by culture, it leads to desirable outcomes because it produces a widespread sense of vigour and hopefulness.

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Can optimism improve the wellbeing of secondary school students?
Another gene correlated with optimism is ADA2b, a gene associated with the neurotransmitter and norepinephrine hormone\(^\text{xii}\). It is known to assist in the formation of emotional memories, and exerts significant influence over our perception of reality by altering the way we react to emotional experiences in real-time. People who possess the ADA2b gene display heightened brain activity, suggesting a physical struggle to perceive negative situations optimistically\(^\text{xiii}\); thus are prone to focus significantly more on negative details. For example if embarking on a hike, they would focus on potential hazards, such as loose rocks which may collapse; whilst people without such gene are likely to focus on embracing nature’s serenity.

Environmental influences which assist in generating optimistic outlooks include positive relationships, past successes (to show that triumphs are possible), and even negative experiences (to prove that hardships can be triumphs are possible), and even negative relationships, past successes (to show that generating optimistic outlooks include positive environmental influences which assist in focusing on embracing nature’s serenity.

Your greatest Vice and Virtue

Optimism is highly publicized as a tool which ensures success; it has been referred to as “the ultimate survival skill"\(^\text{xv}\), and the word itself stems from ‘Optimus’, the Latin term for ‘best’. BUT, do not be fooled; as with anything, there can be too much of a good thing. Whilst optimism produces a myriad benefits including prosperity and life satisfaction\(^\text{xvi}\), being overly optimistic can be detrimental, as it hinders achievement by nurturing dreams, but not action. Dr Gabriele Oettigen, a NYU psychologist, suggests excessive optimism can “leave us with lofty ideas which never reach fruition”\(^\text{xvii}\). Biologically, Oettigen discovered that when preparing to achieve a goal, our bodies physically consume more oxygen and nutrients, increasing energy stores and blood pressure to assist us for what lies ahead. However, solely harnessing and focusing upon desirable fantasies was found to lower systolic blood pressure, proving that deluded optimism causes one to become too much at ease, and less likely to take action\(^\text{xvii}\).

Unrealistic optimists have goals, but believe they are invulnerable; more likely to experience pleasant events than is actually the case, and less likely to be victims of misfortunes. This mindset is criticized by Dr. Martin Seligman, pioneer of positive psychology, as it restrains one from preparing for potential hazards. Often observed in gamblers, this impractical hope precludes conservation of resources, resulting in the draining of financial resources. Unrealistic optimists also tend to neglect health maintenance, as they underestimate the probability of someday experiencing an illness or injury. The average individual sees himself as below average in risk for a variety of maladies, which, of course, cannot be. Psychologist Oliver James suggests that unrealistic optimists repress their problems, continuously insisting that everything in their life is fine, almost ignorant to reality\(^\text{xv}\). By habitually eradicating negative information regarding themselves whilst struggling to comprehend bad news, they also become prone to stress and illnesses which range from common psychosomatic complaints such as "unexplained tummy trouble" to lethal heart-attacks\(^\text{xv}\).

A survey of 66 students supported such claims, with 95% of participants believing that as optimistic and pessimistic mindsets are a psychological characteristic they can be altered, should an individual be willing instigate the effort and action required. A respondent suggested that mindsets are based upon events occurring in life, and though “people can become terribly pessimistic during a stressful experience or personal catastrophe, once the pain subsides, a force of change is ignited to feel happier, and more positive”\(^\text{x}\); in other words, mindsets are a product of experience.

Ultimately, although some may possess a biological propensity to optimism, mindsets are modified and influenced by environmental factors including geography and personal relationships. The evidence that certain mindsets are not solely dictated by genetics we are powerless to change, but rather influenced by a conglomeration of predisposed and situational factors proves that anyone can become more optimistic; if you are willing to put in the effort, so can you.

ABOVE: Photograph courtesy of leadershiptraq.com
"Hope for the best, prepare for the worst."

To ensure you do not become exhausted and demoralized by channelling efforts into unattainable goals, realistic optimism must be practiced. Realistic optimists are "cautiously hopeful of favourable outcomes, yet do as much as possible to obtain desired results." Being both pragmatic and positive allows for visualization, the setting of desirable yet feasible goals, and the acknowledgment of potential difficulties, which ensures necessary measures are taken to attain the best possible outcome. Though consciously acknowledging obstacles and potential failures is often circumvented as it can be disheartening, such introspection equips a person with how to avoid or circumvent as it can be disheartening, such introspection equips a person with how to avoid or overcome adversities, should they arise. Realistic optimism teaches "how to have dreams, but not fantasies- illusions without delusions."

Ultimately, Seligman’s theory of complex optimism should be followed; "use optimism when you judge that less depression, or more achievement, or better health is the issue... also choose when not to use it, when you judge that clear sight is called for. Optimism frees you to achieve the goals you set, (yet) we must also have the courage to ensure pessimism (and realism) when their perspectives are valuable.”

However, Seligman discovered that schools fail to teach such characteristics, instead educating students on literacy, math, and conformity. Education on positive psychology and optimism can assist in managing depression and stress, and enhances learning by encouraging confidence and holistic thinking, in contrast to a typical school’s standardized tests and rules, which produces narrowed attention and critical, rather than creative thinking. Optimism increases levels of happiness and longevity, and is a coping mechanism which helps combat the perpetual stress of school work and social struggles students face day-to-day.

Hope, the ability to conceptualize and find motivation is closely related to optimism. Hope allows us to cultivate and imagine goals, whilst optimism allows us to maintain momentum when striving towards these successes; when working in tandem, maximum academic and social success becomes possible in school environments. A hopeful optimist’s characteristics include a positive attitude about the past, present and future, possessing personal agency, and belief in their ability to positively impact any situation.

**Increasing Optimism in Schools:**

**Breakdown goals:** Students with low optimism often believe that goals have to be accomplished at once- implementing achievable steps will sustain engagement and a sense of accomplishment.

**Encourage enjoyment:** It is crucial that students enjoy the process to ensure that their passion overrides fear of failure or potential setbacks. Positive self-talk is paramount as it instils a sense of self-competency in individuals.

Though it is crucial to educate students on how to cope with setbacks inevitable on the path to success, ultimately, research has proven that by educating secondary students to have more positive mindsets and a more optimistic way of thinking, we can increase the overall wellbeing of adolescents and wider society. Each and every one of us possess the capacity to be optimistic, should we choose to always remember- “even the darkest night will end. And the sun will rise.”

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**What are the benefits of Optimism?**

Optimism is correlated with better mental health, social interaction skills, and motivation. Highly optimistic students develop goals and perceive themselves as capable of solving problems which may arise, and are linked to superior academic and athletic performance (in spite of natural intellectual or sporting abilities). Seligman suggests that optimism can help one to be happier; “to feel more satisfied, to be more engaged with life, find more meaning, have higher hopes, and probably even laugh and smile more, regardless of circumstances.” Seligman conducted a poll which found that ‘wellbeing’— which included factors such as happiness, kindness and fulfilment— was the topmost priority of parents for their children.
ENDNOTES


Optimism 2016, interview conducted by author on 5 April 2016.


Optimism 2016, interview conducted by author on 5 April 2016.


Optimism in School 2016, interview conducted by author on 25 August 2016.


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